

A Murmur in the Weeds: A Memoir

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Abstract

My mother ushered her three children into the living room to greet her new friend coming to dinner. I was nine and tired of new. I wanted the old, my old house, my old school, my old family. Like a caged tigress keen for the full expression of her power unleashed, my mother paced behind the screen door. "He's here!" she said. I anchored myself to the shag carpet, refusing to move for a man-friend, a man who was not my dad. I watched her wrap around him as he set his suitcase down, embracing her in an uplifted bear hug. My younger siblings jumped in curiosity, welcoming this stranger with open arms. In the pit of my stomach, my suspicions stirred an unsettled feeling awake – a feeling that would later grow into a reality of fear and sorrow that invaded and settled into my entire being.

This is a project in life-writing. The story of my youth is a source of pain for me. Even as I begin with this abstract, I am working through the complicated nature of shame and trauma from years of abuse as a child. I wrote my story as a way of coping and making meaning through writing. In addition, my work benefits from research on the specific issues within the genre of autobiography/creative non-fiction/memoir. My goals for this project are to engage in the therapeutic nature of writing, sharpen my narrative skills, and to perhaps inspire others with painful stories to undertake their own healing process on paper.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
Introduction	1
A Murmur in the Weeds	9
Works Cited	52

Introduction: Researching the Making of Me

With an infant in my lap and two toddlers climbing the back of my chair, I browsed the UH Mānoa English Department website for the umpteenth time. I took comfort in knowing a place existed close by where I could hone my writing skills. For many years, I felt burdened by an internal mass of raw material I carried from my past. I envisioned relief could only come through the proper handling on the page as a writer of my difficult childhood and the abuse I experienced from my step-father. Later, when I sat unaccompanied at the computer waiting for my children to return home afterschool, I decided to return to school myself.

I dove headlong into my studies and in my second semester enrolled in English 311 – Autobiographical Writing with Dr. Cynthia Franklin. It felt like an opportunity of a lifetime; I was a dry sponge eager to absorb everything. Swelling with confidence, I poured out a part of my life story in my first assignment. During the peer workshop, one of my fellow classmates called my writing glib. I thought it a compliment until I read the definition at home and cried. It dawned on me that simply writing my story was not going to be simple. I remained determined throughout the semester to stay on task. Dr. Franklin suggested I continue working on my autobiographical project through the Honors Department over the course of my undergraduate degree. That was when I realized the obvious—my personal life intersected with my education. And so, I began learning how to write a memoir on my traumatic experiences of child abuse.

In the Honors Program Introduction to Research class, we each introduced ourselves and offered a brief synopsis of our honors project. My anxiety grew as student after student announced their proposed educational explorations involving microbial worlds and cellular functions, an expansion of the noble cancer study. Even my fellow English cohort's investigation into the spiritual aspects of women's writing sounded fascinating and intimidating. "I'm writing a memoir about my life," I said, red-faced. The instructor looked me over and made the comment

that I thought everyone (including myself) was thinking, “Huh. Well, you must be someone important or have done something important to write a memoir.” Her tone was the equivalent of “Who do you think you are?” I just smiled. Over the next few weeks that followed, whenever we did group work she separated the class by hard sciences, soft sciences, and Brandy’s group. I contemplated abandoning the project. Thankfully, Dr. Franklin reeled me back in and encouraged me that the work of memoir is important and one that involves research, including the reading of other memoirs, of trauma studies, and of life writing scholarship.

Initially, I took interest in trauma and memory—which led me to read about the brain. It appealed to my need to feel academic in my pursuit of what still felt borderline narcissistic. In “The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma” the authors, Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart explain the different response of the brain for traumatic experiences as studied by psychologist, Pierre Janet in the 19th century. Janet identifies three different memory processes: automatic or habit memory, which unconsciously processes new information; narrative memory, which is used to categorize experience into meaning; and traumatic memory. Traumatic memory develops when distress-causing experiences cannot be placed “into existing cognitive schemes and either may be remembered with particular vividness or may totally resist integration” (160). Marian M. MacCurdy writes about trauma and memory referencing van der Kolk’s work. She posits that “painful memories must be processed, adapted to, and ordered for the psyche—not to mention the body—to remain alive and healthy” (162). This was very powerful for me. It gave me insight into why I felt driven, obsessed to write my story. I had an involuntary biological need to process the meaning in these experiences.

In my desire to find meaning I also wanted my memoir to make sense and read seamlessly from beginning to end. But, I was unable to map out a narrative structure to follow. I

wrote separate pieces and struggled to fit them together. In her research, MacCurdy states: “verbalizing emotional experiences is actually quite difficult since the power of those experiences is encoded nonverbally” (165). This phenomenon in van der Kolk’s and van der Hart’s work is called “speechless terror” where the brain fails “to arrange the memory in words and symbols” (172). It was indeed a challenge to describe the events that were short movie clips that, usually replayed uninvited in my mind. I spent more time staring at a blank computer screen or scribbling rambling free-writes about my cognitive paralysis than I’d like to admit. The parameters of deadlines and meetings with Dr. Franklin and committee member, Shawna Yang Ryan gave me the forward momentum I needed to get unstuck. In addition, MacCurdy explains, “traumatic memories focus on fragments rather than narratives” (166). When I removed the pressure of forcing the individual memories into a contiguous framework for a narrative, it made sense to keep the fragments fragmented to form the narrative. I feel that the structure in the arrangement of story-like narratives, along with my commentary and wonderings about life, and poetry mixed in, reflects the disjointed, non-integrated nature of coping with trauma.

Another aspect of my research was developing my writing so that it was not just a dissemination of distressing information. I wanted the writing to speak for the child whose voice was silenced and I wanted the writing to sing as a creative non-fiction work of art. I took English 413 with Dr. Shankar and learned about how to see and practice the narrative components that function together to produce literary music. Since I became overcome with emotion throughout the process, I found it beneficial to separate myself at times by concentrating on the language and treating the writing as a work of fiction. One of the strongest guiding principles I held from English 413 was making the details count. I worked to make the elements work for the scene or picture I attempted to create.

As I continued my study, I read G. Thomas Couser's *Memoir: An Introduction*. He points out the waves of memoirs flowing onto the current shores of publication. Based on the developments of the literary scene Couser considers: "this is an age—if not *the age*—of memoir" (3). While memoirs abound, he states that memoir is not readily understood. Some of the other aspects he elaborates on are memoir's various forms, its limitations, and the work it does. Couser considers memoir and other life narratives, whether written, spoken, or illustrated as "essential to—built into—the formation of individual identity and human relationships" (25). Memoir is categorized under the broader term of life-writing. Couser distinguishes memoir as "a particular, highly developed form of a very broad-based human activity: the narration of our real lives" (26). I took particular interest in the idea that "in writing one's life one may bring a new self into being" (14). It elevated my purpose to write these difficult things in a way not just to speak for the silenced girl of my past, but also to speak for the emerging woman of my present.

The nature of memoir raises many issues. While I focused on speaking for myself, I was also aware that I spoke on behalf of my family members portrayed in my work. Throughout the Autobiography class we grappled with ethical questions and answers about life writing. My ethical dilemmas included my parents. My step-father is deceased and cannot dispute or deny my claims against him. My mother is alive but I have not consulted or warned her about writing this extremely sensitive account. I found peace and resolution in communicating with my sister who validated and clarified my memories. She also urged me to write about my—and our—childhood on behalf of her and our brother. Even though I'm not writing under a pen name and have not presented my memoir as fiction, I changed the names of my family members to offer some sort of anonymity. I also made a different decision to not name my step-father. It was not for his protection, but rather mine. I found that naming him was too overwhelming for me. Recreating

him too fully seemed to bring him back to life giving him power that I was not prepared to negotiate.

In addition, I found it difficult to add dimension to my mother and step-father in the writing. I tried to stay out of their heads in the more narrative parts, mostly because I tried to capture what had been engraved on my mind as a child. In John D. Barbour's essay "Judging and Not Judging Parents" he provides examples of authors who have written memoirs about their parents and the complexities of understanding a parent from a child's perspective and from a parent's perspective. He notes that as writers discover more about their parents as individuals they are less inclined to be judgmental of their mistakes as parents. Barbour also finds that forgiveness and a desire to reconcile is another reason writers refrain from vilifying parents. I did not set out to pass judgment on my mother or step-father; however, I chose not to work at the details of understanding them as individuals. Perhaps the result is flat character representations of these real people whom I was unable to understand. There is the underlying acknowledgement that even after all those difficult moments I still desire to have a relationship with my mother. I feel that I could relate to Barbour's point about not judging my mother because I am motivated to preserve or cultivate a relationship with her in the future.

It was also important for me to be accurate in my retelling of the past and I didn't want to embellish or remove details for the sake of a good story. I thought to tell the truth is to be ethical and I needed to get every detail correct. In *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative*, Vivian Gornick clarifies the idea of telling the truth in memoir writing:

Truth in a memoir is achieved not through a recital of actual events; it is achieved when the reader comes to believe that the writer is working hard to engage with the experience at hand. What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened. For that the power of a writing imagination is required. (91)

This, and Dr. Franklin's reassurance that I didn't need to divulge every last detail changed my perspective on handling the truth. It was unnecessary and impossible to tell the whole story of my childhood as it happened. While juggling these different decisions I chose not to include certain events and details such as the failure of government and non-profit agencies, school systems, neighbors and family members to intervene. I especially avoided directly disclosing the sexual abuse I experienced. Lack of time was a crucial factor in my exclusion of those events. I realized that I did not have the mental and emotional space to accommodate the engagement process of these experiences. Couser also notes that the act of writing a memoir requires details that memory is unreliable in providing. He writes, "as a literary genre, memoir involve a degree of creativity. So there is a paradox at the heart of memoir: the genre demands a fidelity to truth that may overtax its source and conflict with its aspirations as art" (80). Despite my acknowledging this paradox, I'm unsure that I accomplished the balance within my writing. My hope is to take this project further as I learn and practice this delicate craft and build new tiers of truth and art to this base layer.

It also seemed an obvious part of my research to read other memoirs. I sought to get a sense of what writers have written and to evaluate my choices for my own memoir. It soon became overwhelming for me to read the memoirs of other writers. I was overcome with emotion and could not read for longer than a few minutes. I didn't understand my aversion to these writings. I felt ashamed because it was as if I couldn't stand to hear someone else's pain. I also didn't talk discuss this during any of my thesis meetings. I felt immediate relief when I read a passage from the chapter "The Ethics of Reading: Witnessing Traumatic Childhoods" in Kate Douglas's book *Contesting Childhood*, she quotes E. Ann Kaplan: "There is a very fine line between affective witnessing and traumatic transference—between the recipients feeling

empathy and becoming vicariously traumatized by the traumatic life narrative they consume” (Douglas 153). While I was writing my memoir it was incredibly difficult to make the switch from my pain to another’s pain. I experienced the difficulty of walking that “fine line.” In relation to witnessing, in the article “To hear—to Say: The Mediating Presence of the Healing Witness,” Sheryl Brahnham writes: “The healing witness bears witness to the survivor’s suffering by holding herself back to move closer, allowing emotions, such as aversion, dread, confusion, and anger to arise within herself, while yet affording the survivor the space/spacing necessary to speak the unspeakable” (66). Brahnham states that writers of trauma find the ability to speak (or write) the unspeakable when a witness is there to offer a listening ear and therefore healing.

In the arena of research regarding healing and writing, I didn’t formally examine scholarship—though it was one of my initial motivations when I started. I have always personally felt writing was cathartic for me—the reason why I chose to write about my experiences through memoir. Yet, I have also felt that exposing myself in this manner could also have devastating consequences. I’m still also deliberating what it means to heal from trauma. The little that I have read on the subject made me feel uncomfortable and skeptical. It also seemed too complicated to add to the already intense work I committed to in discovering memoir and making decisions on how to write my own. I would however, like to explore that topic in the future.

While most of my time was spent composing my memoir, I see that I could have transitioned into a comprehensive study of memoir itself. The research components that I reviewed were constructive in creating and managing my work. Despite an uneasiness of determining whether this experience was beneficial or detrimental to my overall well-being and self-discovery in the long run, I feel a great sense of accomplishment by what I have produced

thus far. Ultimately, I am indebted to the women who have opened their hearts and minds to walk with me along this journey that is just beginning. Thank you, Dr. Cynthia Franklin, Shawna Yang-Ryan, and my resilient, loving, amazing baby sister, Trissy Lynn.

I

am a syllable in the dark,

a murmur in the weeds.

I am a whimper in the folds of the wind.

Don't pause for me.

Lose me in the tides of Time.

Heed the call of the Horizon.

Bask in the laughter of Tomorrow.

And

Pretend I am not

the sharpness in your lungs,

the burn at your tongue,

the ache around your heart.

Consume me in your denial.

Sleep

Until my roar trembles you awake

To Acknowledge

To Listen

To Believe

Me

I don't remember the first hit. I can't pinpoint that exact moment when he changed from the soft-spoken, easy-going uncle who brought us gifts and made my mother laugh with her whole body. I do know that it started after he married my mother and moved us all out of Apo's crowded, three-bedroom house. I remember that first drive down the street, the summer before my fourth grade. A bright, cloudless sky welcomed us into the culdesac where our white-trimmed, royal blue, single-story home stood. A handful of kids rode their bikes, one of them waved as we pulled into our driveway. I was excited that there would be kids to play with after school now. The house was enormous. I did cartwheels in the empty living room under the cathedral ceiling. My brother was happy he would have his own room. My sister and I would share and have a bunkbed. I was the oldest, "The Boss," so I would get the top, of course.

When I was a teenager, I thought back to that moment, wondering where it all went wrong.

Shhhh. Don't remember. Don't tell. Why would you do that to yourself?

Close the door. Lock it, throw away the key. Don't remember. Forget. Shhhh.

I have a recurring nightmare. Monsters are after me out of the throat of hell that is my hallway. Jagged claws reach to shred me and stuff me in their decaying mouths. The promise of pain echoes through every vein, sinew, cell, down to the last morsel of me.

I race ahead. I am just out of reach. I make it to the end of the hallway untouched and spring upward. I can fly! I cram myself into the inside point of the ceiling, a terrorized, human triangle. In the unreachable distance, a dozen open windows reveal an open sky. I need to get out. I have no room to maneuver. I am exhausted. It takes everything in me to keep myself afloat. How much longer can I hold on?

Here I am. Hovering in the three-foot space above my bed at the top of the bunk. My back is firm against the ceiling. I watch myself sleeping. My eyes are closed as I lie in bed. I see me watching myself. There in the dark, suspended, we wait to be devoured.

In the morning, I find that I am still alive for now. But today is Sunday; there is still time to die. No welcomed school bus at the end of the street. No other reason to be anywhere but here. It is early; I strain for any sounds of life. I press my ear to the wall of my brother's room. Nothing. I need to pee. The house is still, so I take my chances.

I control the eighty-some-odd pounds of my fifth-grade body in each step down the ladder. I know which rung will creak and pray my calculations will distribute me in silence. My room holds its breath for my every step. I pause at the doorknob and exhale slowly. If I fail to retract its brass tongue correctly, my mistake will be a gunshot. I cannot make a sound. It takes a full minute to make

the clockwise journey, my right wrist aching in the grasp of my left hand. I pull the door ajar. It takes another minute to make the counter-clockwise spin back.

My mother's and step-father's bedroom door is closed. Good. I step out on the balls of my feet in the dark, wood-paneled hallway. Every movement forward feels impossible. I labor down the hall, inching closer. I'm nearly there. As I turn into the bathroom, I catch a glimpse of him sitting in his green leather chair in the corner of the living room. I pick up the pace with my last two steps and close the door quickly, but not too quickly. My mind races. I contemplate my next move: Should I go into the kitchen? Go back to my room? Find a way to crawl through the drain? I spend no more time than would seem appropriate for a morning wash-up routine. I decide to enter the kitchen in the hopes of providing my siblings a few more moments to rest in peace.

My step-father sits under a tall lamp, his arms folded in his lap, his legs crossed. His shoulder-length, black hair is slicked back into a ponytail to mimic his idol, Steven Seagal. I feel his stare magnified in his thin-rimmed glasses as I walk the path between him and the blank television. He says nothing. I continue around the wall that separates the kitchen. I pause to assess my options. There is no time to wonder if I should eat the non-restricted cereal or appear productive by wiping already clean counters because he is there, silently behind me. I turn to face him and he moves toward me while I back up toward the stove at the back wall. He opens the fridge, blocking me in. I back into a corner. I have nowhere to go.

He stands in the open draft and begins taking containers out. After opening the first container he jiggles its gelatinous contents and scrunches his nose at the unpleasant odor.

"Smell this," he directs, shoving it in my face.

Reluctantly, I sniff.

"You want to eat this?" he asks through grinding teeth.

"No," I say and swallow back the tears that swell in my throat.

"Me neither," he says and pours the putrid dinner remains onto my head.

I am relieved for a brief moment that it wasn't made my breakfast. Then the rotting grease slides into my eyes, down my cheeks, slipping into the corners of my lips. I taste the disgusting smell and press my lips together harder. It takes all my energy not to throw-up. I have made that mistake before.

He fumbles with the next container--a filled Tupperware of spaghetti and mold balls.

"What about this?" he asks.

Not waiting for an answer, he shakes out the spoiled noodles over me, making sure nothing is left sticking to the bottom of the bowl. He continues, one container after another. I can hardly see through the vomit-inducing goop over my eyes. The old food supply runs out before his fury, so he adds fresh yogurt, dressings, and a new carton of orange juice.

The juice splashes off my shoulders and onto his feet. He steps back in disbelief, furious. He winds to slap me. I flinch. He puts his arm back down since I

am saturated in slop. He glares at me and walks away to wipe the drips off his toes.

"Clean it up!" he yells and stomps toward his room, pounding at the doors to wake my siblings. He shrieks his orders for them to go to the kitchen.

They stumble out quickly, rubbing nightmares from their eyes only to find this grotesque human pile of waste, helpless before them. Their horrified faces cause a sweeping sensation of pity in my stomach. I feel sorry for them, and for me. I let my tears work their way through the vile mix.

"I'll get some towels," my brother whispers and tip-toes back to the hall closet.

My baby sister, only six, is keenly aware of the clean-up routine. It will be a six-hour project. The three of us, erasing the evidence of the shameful scene, triple scrubbing every possible surface, and prolonging the whole process to look busy for as long as possible. Too much time left in the day leaves us vulnerable.

Our mother casually enters mid-morning. She steps between us cleaning on our hands and knees. She no longer bothers to offer empty promises of a new life without him. She no longer fights for us or begs him to stop. She repeats her disinterested mantra: *This is what happens when you don't listen. You guys should know better by now.*

We nod. But all we do is listen. And we do know better. We know not to make noise. We know that everything makes him mad. And we know no one will come to help us.



Oil and Acrylic Painting by: Trissy Lynn

What's important for me to tell you? What do you want to know?

What do I want you to know?

Why do I care that you know what I know?

How do I transport you there without getting lost in that dark place,
the one I've been running from since I can remember?
How do I resurrect the past yet keep it from becoming my present?

I set booby traps at night. I feel like the little sidekick kid in *Indiana Jones*.
I'm resourceful and creative. I string yarn from my bed, across my room door to
drawer handles, and wrap it around toys with bells or heavier objects that might
wake me up a second before he enters. It works. It makes me feel powerful and
smart. Those few precious seconds rob him of the element of surprise. He soon
catches on and removes the door entirely. It doesn't matter because I'm always
surprised even when I'm expecting the worst.

It is three or four in the morning. Most likely a school night. The light
switches on. I'm ever on the defense but unprepared for the downpour of his
rage, fish blood and ice cubes. I am too shocked to cry. I don't know where to
start to clean it up. It reeks. I reek. I cannot comprehend him, this life.

Heads in toilets. Dirty socks in mouths. Maggots pulled from the garbage.
Faces pushed into the floor. Hair pulling. Punches. Kicks. Cuts. Bruises. Heaving
sobs. Wishes for death.

I don't trust you. I don't trust me. I believe I can see through you. You want the shocking, the
disgusting details, to be entertained. Don't you? And I want you to have them.

Why? For your pity? Your heightened awareness of social injustice?

What will this negotiation of meaning between you and me bring?

Twelve seems too young to want to die. So, the more time separates me from my preteen self, the older I think I was when I wrote my first suicide note. I couldn't have been twelve, could I? But I was. It was the year before I ran away for the first time at thirteen. I blamed myself. I was the example. The oldest. I could do nothing right. I believed his words: "good-for-nothing, a waste-of-space." Perhaps if I hadn't been born things would be different. I wrote the letter to my mother. "Dear Mom, I'm sorry for everything." I didn't have a plan just the overwhelming desire to stop living. I broke down in tears as I imagined my mother grieving for me as she did when her mother passed. She stayed in her room for days, wailing and sobbing, sobbing and wailing. I had never known her so distraught. I was afraid that she might die too. Surely, she would cry to the point of death for me?

I don't know her anymore as my mother. She is a woman I lived with for almost 16 years. I try not to be cruel to her in my memory of our time together. But I cannot find her for long. I have snippets. Shopping at the mall. Teaching me to use a sewing machine. Driving just me somewhere, talking and giggling. Selling the most girl scout cookies for me at work and winning the grand prize. Gardenias and Georgio perfume. For the most part she is hidden in his shadow,

watching and knowing from far away. Yet, I know she loved me. Maybe she still does, but we are strangers now.

My mother teased me with a sly smile, saying, "You know Grandma had Alzheimer's and they say it skips a generation. That means you will get Alzheimer's."

It's Saturday morning and I am about eight. My mother, my siblings and I live with my grandmother, my mother's mom, and Apo, my step-grandfather. I try not to be alone in a room with grandma because something is wrong with her. I think she's still sleeping in her room so I watch cartoons on the large, wood-framed, analog TV in the living room. But she is not sleeping. She approaches me from the kitchen. I'm afraid of her ghost white hair and thin, wrinkled skin. She is upset and begins her interrogation.

"Who are you? Why are you in my house?"

"I'm Brandy, your granddaughter."

"Who?"

"Brandy"

"I don't know you."

"I'm Lilly's daughter."

"Oh, Lilly," she relaxes and looks me over before turning to go into the kitchen.

She soon returns with the same questions again and again.

"Brandy, Lilly's daughter. Brandy, Lilly's daughter. Brandy, Lilly's daughter."

"Who are you?"

"I'M BRANDY! LILLY'S DAUGHTER!"

I don't trust my memory.

I tell my sister about what I'm trying to do. I ask for her help. I tell her if she doesn't want to I understand. I ask her if I'm remembering it right. It seems too crazy.

She tells me it is crazy. I am thankful that we have each other.

My sister and I sit in the wee hours of the morning and whisper. We reminisce and draft eulogies for Grandma's funeral in the morning, our real dad's mom. Coqui frogs chant in the overgrown trees and foliage outside that once was the magical garden we traversed when on rare occasion our dad flew into Hilo for a softball tournament. Three of my children are sound asleep, two on the futon couch and one in a sleeping bag on the 70's speckled yellow and brown shag carpet I made sure to vacuum. My sister and I situate ourselves carefully on the worn couch that was Grandma's bed. In sickness Grandma joined Grandpa in the living room when only a special hospital bed could provide momentary relief in his cancer diagnosis, which he had received a decade earlier. At night, they shined flashlights on the ceiling. One light chasing the other, creating circles, love glowing bright. In death, she stayed at his side and swore his

flashlight followed hers for months while she grieved until one day it didn't and she knew he wouldn't be back.

We cry. We will miss her sweet, loving, and joyful presence--a saving grace. We laugh quietly about the time my sister dyed her hair blonde and Grandma was transported to the 1940's. She had to keep reminding Grandma that she wasn't the same woman who stole dishes from Grandma's parent's restaurant. *It's me, Grandma. Remember? It's me, Lynn. Your granddaughter. Don't forget.*

Grandma knew there was trouble in our youth. Sometimes she brought up the time I walked down the nine-mile stretch of country road from our house to hers late one night. "Oh, so dangerous and dark. How did you manage?" I just smiled and shrugged. She answered with her own fears about what could be lurking in the woods beyond. Night marchers maybe. She never asked what I was running from. And I made sure never to tell her.

The whispered conversation with my sister drifts into our own past--as it often does in the safety of our survival and our adulthood. We unravel into an unspoken, unscheduled routine. Our physical separation living on different islands provides the right amount of time and space between these forays into our past.

The color red. Feeling sick at night. A dream of red syrup on a spoon. Him forcing it down her throat. A dream? Those nights when she crawled up to the top bunk to sleep next to me. Vomit. Pieces of corn. Pink chunks. In my hair. Her

hair. My face. Hers. On clothes, pillows, blankets, sheets. The dreadful movements of creeping about to clean it up and the self-control needed to keep the contents of my stomach inside. Not a dream.

Medicine. Dimetapp? Robitussin? Meanings converge in that moment. Why? Sedation? Murder? Oh, God. How much do we forget? How much do we want to remember? It's enough for one night, one visit.



Oil and Acrylic Painting by: Trissy Lynn

I'm sorry this is all I have to offer you. I'm sorry, baby sister, I couldn't take you with me. I'm sorry, baby brother, I left you behind. I'm sorry I pretended it didn't happen. I'm sorry I moved on and created a new life, a new family. I'm sorry these words are just words. I'm sorry they will

never be enough. I'm sorry this is not the whole story. I'm sorry it can never be the whole story.
I'm sorry to bring it all back up now. I'm sorry this is a simple, sanitized, abbreviated version of
the truth. I'm sorry this happened to you.

I'm sorry this happened to us.

I expected a bigger punishment for running away again than holding a glass ashtray. It almost felt like a reward to have a new punishment. Maybe it worked. Maybe it will be different. After all, my brother and I were old enough to conspire to get a hold of a disposable camera and collect evidence from our bodies. Perhaps he knows what we know.

I stand against the closed wooden front door in the living room. "Hold this." I take the clear ashtray. "Out!" he gestures for me to hold it away from my body. "One hand!" I do as he says. He sits in his chair and watches TV. Seconds pass and my arm starts to ache. He sees me struggle. "Don't drop it." I don't know what this is. He gets up and places a greenish-blue, cat's eye marble in the ashtray and returns to his seat. My arm is shaking. I am panicking. I realize I have made it worse. I use my other hand to stabilize my elbow. "Put your hand down!" He places more marbles. I whimper and whine softly. I cannot hold it any longer and release. The marbles fall and so does his fist on my temple. I see stars like the characters in the cartoons. His new pattern of hitting us becomes obvious later, headshots don't translate well on film.

The ashtray loses its appeal to him after a few weeks since our stamina lasts but a minute or two. He tells us to run. Run? Run. In place. We run every day, for everything. A cabinet left slightly open? Run. Took a minute too long in the shower? Run. Slippers not lined straight enough outside the door? Run. Doing homework? Run. "High knees," he yells. We run until the sweat runs down our faces.

Once while running in the dining room I could see the time on the microwave. Time seemed to stand still when he was there and I wanted to quantify it in the reality that I knew existed apart from the house, from him. Five hours. I ran for five hours straight with high and low knees. I kept moving as he sat and watched me and the TV. Watching the time pass minute by minute did two things: It confirmed the excessiveness of our torment and established my inner strength. It became for me, a race against him. I would win if I didn't collapse before he told me to stop. I wouldn't give him the satisfaction. And I never did.

But after a time when we stopped crying and fussing and showing our misery, he began his threats. "You want to run by the mailbox so the neighborhood can see how bad you are?" "No, please, no," we begged. Soon, it turned into, "You want to run naked at the mailbox?"

"No!" With higher knees to prove our willingness to repent. I believed he would make us do it and I made sure to put on a show.

Sometimes I wonder whether I can be truly happy.

Is life a scale?

Can the sum of greater happiness outweigh the sadness?

Or will my present happiness always feel the tug of an underlying anchor?

At first it sounded like an animal. Moaning. It woke me up through my closed door. I went to investigate. It was coming from their bedroom. Their door left open a sliver; enough for a single eye to peer. The room was lit by a small bluish light. I didn't understand what I was seeing or hearing until the day I understood what I was seeing and hearing. Their bodies under the blanket, squirming. The sick, addictive feeling of watching and listening.

Then one day their door was wide open. The mid-morning light filled the house. There was no blanket. No clothes. My mother on his lap. The two of them interlocked on top of the side frame of their waterbed. My walk past their room, my pause of shock, her small cry in response, my fleeing, my room door closing, my keeping my sister inside.

My mother and I stood in the garage. She put her left hand in front of my face and wiggled her fingers dressed in diamonds. "Look at all this," she said and opened her arms like a gameshow model. "I hope that when you are thirty, you get to have what I have. A house, two cars and a boat with your name on it."

She ran her manicured hand over the red, yellow, and orange acrylic paint on the side of his 16-foot boat.

I was glad for the bigger boat--it meant he took us less often on family fishing trips. An upgrade from the tiny rubber raft we rode on in Hilo Bay. I was terrified to be out in the open ocean on that flimsy floating balloon that confined the five of us together. My insignificance and powerlessness magnified under the blinding sun. As he pushed the little engine to high speed, the front end flailed against the waves, obscuring the horizon. I struggled against my hair in my face and the bloated life jacket. There was nothing to grab onto but my brother and sister. We held each other. "Isn't this fun?" our mother yelled. I managed a smile through the constant threat of being flung overboard.

Once we were trailing our way back to shore when a baby whale breached next to our raft. "Look! A baby whale!" My step-father pointed at a black bumpy lump in the water a few feet away. My heart dropped. I froze. I couldn't believe the baby was bigger than our raft. I could swear we were starting to sink. My stepfather kept in stride with it and I grew dizzy from panic. I wanted him to leave it alone. All I could think about was its mother. Where is she? She must be under us. She must be angry. I imagined her rising from the depths, flying up out of the water and belly flopping us into our deaths. But she didn't. The baby swam alone. She was nowhere to be found.

They have a baby together. I'm eleven. Weeks after Junior is born, I'm woken up during the night to make his bottles, feed him, and rock him back to sleep. I change diapers after school. I deliver baby food drop-offs from his airplane spoon to his toddler face so I can hear him laugh. I bathe him. Sing to him. When he is a preschooler, I get up to get him ready for the bus before I get ready for my bus. I love him.

When he is about two, they suspect he has a hearing problem. He gets tested and it is confirmed. He's deaf. He blames me for his son, Junior's deafness. I must have caused it. I believe him.



Oil and Acrylic Painting by: Trissy Lynn

White pills. Neat little rows. Pondering. Pleading. Is this how it all ends?

Some days I feel robbed and some days I feel blessed.

Some days life feels linear and cumulative, some days altogether random.

Was it necessary to go through the valley to reach the mountain peak?

Many days I find myself distant from the moment, from life unfolding now.

I'm always running to catch up with my present.

We ate well. We didn't go hungry but, there were his "good" snacks that we couldn't touch: dry-roasted peanuts, corn-pops cereal, rocky road ice cream. It was a huge achievement to pop a few peanuts in my mouth when he wasn't home. I made sure to note the exact position of the label before I touched it. I knew when to wait for a new jar as the nuts neared the bottom so not to cause any suspicion.

We ate a lot of fish from his fishing trips and if we appeared less than enthused, my mother would say, "You are so lucky. People don't get to eat like this. When you grow up you'll look back and remember how good you had it."

He was the only one who could cook his fish. Neither my mother nor I possessed the right skills. He explained the searing technique that fancy restaurants used, crisp on the outside and pink in the middle. Our mother was giddy with the sign of decadence before us and suggested we offer our gratitude by giving our compliments. It became mandatory, "our compliments

to the chef," whether he had cooked or not, along with the mannered, "may I please be excused from the table?" Many nights we were not excused. So, we sat around the glass table, silent except for our intermittent question that went unanswered in his silence from the green leather chair. My sister often nodding and swaying her head. My brother and I smiling ever so slightly because it was funny to think of her sleeping on her plate.

When he was ready for bed, he excused us, "You're excused." Or he wouldn't. On those nights, my mother came out of her room and excused us to clean the kitchen, shower, and get ready for school. We went to bed hoping it wasn't a night when he'd come in and strip us of the layers of blankets that sheltered us from the cold mountain air. One by one, he took them, then jackets snuck from the closet, clothes removed from drawers, hour after hour until sleep was nothing but a dream.

Pushups.

One hundred increments. Counting out loud.

Fifty-six, Fifty-sevennn,

I don't hear you, start again

1, 2, 3, 4

There were birthdays and presents, friends and video games.

There were gymnastics and judo lessons. School potlucks and girl scout meetings.

There were pets. Restaurants, vacations, county fairs and sandcastles.

There were visits with extended family and home-cooked meals.

There was the potential for a wonderful childhood.

As a child, I thought no one on the outside could hear him yelling at us inside. I reasoned that if someone knew, they would help. We needed an adult witness.

I wrote a poem. A poem that got me in trouble. I wish I still had it because it was through those fifty or so words that I came to understand the power of the written word. The fact that I could possess any kind of power changed me.

My seventh-grade English teacher was excited. She wanted to enter my poem in a contest and had already called and left a message for my mother to get permission. I wanted to throw up. "Oh, okay," I probably replied trying not to show any emotion. School was my safe place and I had made the mistake of crossing the boundary that separated my home life. It was never meant to be read by my mother and especially not by him. I knew enough not to mention any private details. But, I cringed at how I expressed my desire to be loved by my parents, by him.

The day went by quicker than normal and during the last period a note from the office arrived. "OOOhhhhh," came the usual taunting from classmates, amplifying my terror. My mother wanted me to call her asap. I'm dead.

I called her from the office. She was furious. I held the receiver a few inches from my ear. How could you do this? You wait until he gets home. I decided not to wait but to run.

I ran to my best friend, Mary. She knew most all my secrets and was very protective. But, she panicked too, especially after I missed my bus. It was now serious. We sought the help of a third friend who had a sister in high school with a car. We drove around aimlessly for a bit, deliberating. Someone remembered a health class video about a place where kids could go if they needed help. A big yellow sign in a window would mark our destination.

Our mission ended quickly with only a few stores to search in the small town. There it was, a large, bright-yellow diamond-shaped sign with a logo of a child being embraced by an adult. The bold, black lettering announced, "SAFE PLACE." It was posted inside a 7-11. We entered and invoked the powers of the sanctuary from a confused cashier. She led us to the back storeroom stacked with cartons of cigarettes. We were stuck there until our anxiety turned to anger. What kind of safe place is this?

When the door finally opened, a police officer appeared. "Who's Brandy? Follow me." The big sister of the group asked him where he was going to take me. "Home," he replied. Ignoring our protests, the officer led me out of the stockroom and into his SUV. On the twenty-minute ride he lectured me. As we pulled up to the house, he reprimanded me to "be good."

I felt seasick as my step-father emerged to greet the officer. They were unnervingly friendly as I watched their interaction from the car. The hearty handshake, smiles, and chuckles. The officer waved me out and I took my walk of shame. As I walked past them down the driveway I heard the officer ask, "How's your dad?"

I am a novice. An infant. My skill is dull and sloppy. I cannot take the language and form it to my will; it does not yield to me. I cannot shape it into a monument of my experience. It is agonizing to reach out for the expression of my soul and return empty. Yet it is my only recourse, my flimsy solution. The language fails me, I in turn fail the language.

They apologize. Somehow your story got mixed up... *you mean lost, buried, forgotten.* We should have removed your sister years ago. Prosecutors. Suits. Paperwork. Signatures. Justice. More apologies for uncomfortable questions. Interrogation. Answers: *Almost every day. Just about all the time. Years and years.* No, no that's too vague. We need specifics. The law, they say. The law needs details. Times. Dates. Significant events. *Justice?* The details amount to three counts. *Three.* We need you to get him to confess. We'll be right here next to you. We'll record him as you confront him on the phone. We'll tell you what to say. We'll protect you. *Absolutely not.* We need you to testify. *I won't.* You must. I pray. I beg God. I sweat my request, *if you can hear me God, don't let me testify.*

I don't need to testify. *Thank you, God.* My step-father confesses. He is found guilty. My mother tells us that doesn't make him guilty. She said he confessed to the abuse so that he wouldn't have to endure the stress of a trial. It was to protect his failing health. He's the victim.



Oil and Acrylic Painting by: Trissy Lynn

At nineteen, I think that because I'm a mother now, no longer a child that things will be different. I want my mother to love my son. He is beautiful and perfect. I want his life to be beautiful and perfect, despite my single-parent status. I decide that means it includes my mother.

My best friend picks me up from the airport. She's unsure about my safety. I tell her it'll be fine, it's only a couple of days. I mean what can he do now? She drops me at their house. I walk in and my mother is delighted to hold and kiss and fawn over my chubby six-month-old. He remains seated in his chair in the corner. I say, "Hi" as I walk past him, and he says, "hi," with exaggerated disgust. His voice sends chills up my spine.

I put my bags in my brother's room. After running away too many times, he is placed in a foster home. My mother wants me to go out with my friends while she babysits. I hesitate but could use the break. My step-father looks pale and fragile sulking in the corner watching TV. Mary comes back to pick me up.

We go to a party in a garage at a house I'd never been to. My brother is there too. We're surprised to see each other. I'm so happy he's there getting drunk, smoking weed. We talk stories. We quickly acknowledge our little sister. Still there. We return to the party. Yet I pass on the party festivities. Explain that I'm going to church now. The party girl turned church girl with a kid. Bummer. My brother tells me he knows my secrets. Infamous stories about what I was doing when I was out "studying" with my friends. We regret my ill-timed reformation, the

loss of drug therapy nights that will never be. I tell him I'm staying at the house. He is shocked and can't believe I left my baby there. I feign confidence. I want to get back now. Damn, I made a huge mistake.

Mary brings me home. Sober. Things are different. Mary reminds me she'll come get me if I need to get out, like old times. But he's gone to bed and my mother is still cuddling and goo-ing and gaa-hing over my baby boy. My sister is smiling and playing with him too. We talk at a normal volume. Laugh. Bedtime comes and so does sleep. Maybe not a mistake.

3 a.m., my brother's bed, my son sound asleep next to me, a figure in the dark with us. Him. Him. Him. Nothing has changed. Not even me. I'm still afraid. I'm still silent. I'm still helpless. He shuffles through a drawer then leaves. I stay awake until morning. I am angry. I tell her I cannot stay there because of him. It was a mistake. She begs me. I leave.

My son meets his grandmother again in a restaurant at age four, a parking lot at six, and my sister's wedding at eight.

I am twenty-two. I'm in love. About to get married in a week. I contemplate asking my mother to attend the wedding. I can't remember when we last spoke. I don't want him there. I work up the courage to call her. I hope he doesn't answer the phone. He does. I am ten again. I'm afraid. "Can I speak to my mom?" Hold on. "Lilly, your 'daughter.'" He calls sarcastically. She

answers. I know he's still on the other line. I tell her I'm getting married. She congratulates me flatly.

"I wanted to see if you and Junior could come to the wedding."

Long pause. "What about him?"

Silence.

"Well, if he's not invited. We won't come."

Though I'd anticipated the rejection, the hurt feels just as fresh as ever. I don't want my life as a married woman to feel missing from the start. I don't want to look at an empty "mother-of-the-bride" seat on that joyous day. So, I call my ex-stepmom the day before the wedding. I ask her to take my mother's place. She is taken aback and politely refuses. I tell her it's only for the unity candle. No big deal. I feel desperate. She expresses how she could never fill my mother's shoes but agrees because she loves me. I thank her and hold back my sobs. What should she wear? A dress...black.

Again and again, I stand at her door. Knocking and waiting. Waiting and knocking.

I cannot help myself.

My husband and I go to visit my dad and grandparents in Hilo. On the way, I make an impulse decision to stop by my mother's work place and surprise her so I can introduce my husband. We're in public. We embrace. We have introductions. She thanks us for coming.

Later that afternoon she calls me.

"You need to come home."

"To the house? Why?" I ask.

"Because you need to apologize to your father."

I feel heat emanating from my cheeks. My breath getting hot. "He is not my father."

"How dare you say that. He raised you. Took care of you. And look at what you've done to this family."

I am stunned.

"Now you need to apologize to him before he dies so he can have peace."

"No! I will never apologize. I did nothing wrong. In fact, he owes me an apology. And if he wants to apologize he can call me. Because that's the only time I'll ever talk to him again."

I hang up. I'm angry and breathing hard. My head is pulsating. I'm surprised at myself. Proud of my courage. My husband holds me and I am safe at home.

I call my mother after my daughter is born. From my hospital bed.

You have a granddaughter.

Oh. Congratulations. What's her name?

Layla.

Ah, like Lilly.

Oh! Uh, yeah. Like Lilly.

She mails a pretty organza dress and a few baby things. I keep the dress in a box with her hospital bracelet; a little teddy bear; the birth announcement I photoshopped to look like a Hawaii driver's license--a "License to Love Layla"; her pink, toddler ballet shoes and leotard; a Ziploc of a curl from her first haircut.

Layla meets Lilly at my sister's wedding. I'm panicked when my mother carries my one-year-old daughter over to him at their table. He smiles and grabs her little hand and gently shakes it. Minutes pass. I tell my husband to get our baby back.

Layla and Lilly have a reunion a decade later at the beach.

I tell my sister that she is the strongest of us all. How she endured the longest. She told me how after I left, things got worse. How he spread dog feces around their rooms, on their things. How he removed the bathroom door. The bathroom door.

Even after she was placed in foster care and later lived with our dad when he moved back to Hilo, she went back to visit our mother and Junior while he was there. How she spent holidays with him. How she had conversations with him. How did she stand it? How?



Oil and Acrylic Painting by: Trissy Lynn

It's my dad on the phone. I can tell something is wrong by his tone. I'm unprepared for the news—mostly because I had believed that news of my step-

father's death would have been preceded by some metaphysical shift that I'd feel in my bones. I half listen to the details. I survey my feelings. *Am I happy? No. Am I sad? No. Angry? No. Do I care? No. Should I care? Does that make me a bad person?*

I tell my dad, "Maybe things will change. Get better between me and her."

"Yes, it might. But it also might not," he says.

I am overwhelmed.

I am in a fast food drive-thru in my van. A big black truck is behind me, it's not even the same kind of truck he owned. He's not behind the wheel, although I cannot see the driver. I cannot breathe. I feel trapped. He's not even alive. But for a moment, I am a child in Hilo. I am stuck and dizzy with fear. I am irrational. I don't acknowledge my children buckled in car seats spouting out orders for French fries and barbecue sauce. I am alone, about to be crushed.

"May I take your order? Hello? Hello?"

"Oh, yes. Burgers, fries, barbecue sauce...*and a shot of whisky.*"

I think it's probably a good idea to seek professional help, so I make an appointment with a therapist near my house. The closest woman taking new patients. I'm skeptical. I'm not certain I need it or if it will help. My last stint at therapy lasted a few weeks. As a newly baptized Christian at nineteen, I had too

many arguments with the therapist. I told her the best therapy would be forgiveness. We bumped heads about what that meant. I know now what she was trying to tell me. Since I'm older, therapy seems the mature thing to do.

My new therapist is late for our first session. I debate if I should take it as a sign. But, she calls and apologizes. I wait. It's a small, homey but cluttered office. Her room has an orange glow, a cloud of mild incense fills the air. She directs me to the loveseat with scratchy, embroidered pillows. I share my skepticism and earlier feud of faith with the last therapist. She tells me not to worry and declares her love for Jesus, but says that Jesus has a place outside of this room. I tell her I have Mommy issues. She seems nice but with a large helping of ain't-nobody-messes-with-me attitude.

We have a few, non-insurance covered sessions. I find her swearing off-putting, but I don't say anything. I start to think it isn't working. She tells me she may miss a few appointments because her husband has stage 4 cancer. I feel terrible for her and her family. I decide to schedule one last appointment so she doesn't suspect my doubts in her helping me during her own personal crisis. I feel selfish and embarrassed. I want to care about her and her situation. I decide it's too much for me to handle and stop going altogether. But my past remains, beckoning a confrontation.

Another weekend. We wake to his yelling and throwing things in the living room. GET HERE NOW! We enter, so does our mother. It is chaos. The furniture:

loveseats, side tables, bookshelves are upside-down, sideways, out of place. Books litter the floor. Video and music cassette tapes strewn everywhere, separated from their covers. Laundry from the dryer scattered amongst the pile. Pens, newspapers, mail, framed pictures of supernovas and the wonders of space. He doesn't have to tell us even though he does. We set out on the task while he reminds us of our stupidity and uselessness. We navigate around him in the stationary sea of debris. In between the running and the push-ups, we reset the living room.

Something happens. He is sitting in the middle of the mess belittling us. Possessed, I pick up the heavy dictionary next to me and I hurl it at his head. Time elongates the flight of the book. It hits him square and hard in his face. The gasps of my brother, sister, and mother are silent but very loud. He fixes his glasses and turns a deep crimson. I feel the blood drain from my head and the room becomes warped, the walls curve in around me. It is just him and his tomato face in the tunnel. He doesn't look at me. He doesn't speak. He stands up and goes to his room. He doesn't slam the door. He doesn't alter or add to his usual punishments. He never mentions it again. It is an alternate universe. For the first time ever, I realize that he is weak. If there ever was a reason to destroy me, this was it. Perhaps he will not kill me after all. Without the fuel of impending death, the blaze of fear inside started to die that day.

I imagined she was under his spell. And one day the spell would be broken. She would come for us and leave him behind.

Young girl,
arise from your stone tower
call out your own name
Who stole your voice?
Take up your pen
Slay the dragons of your
once upon a time
You are not the scars of their terror
Young girl
Take the key in your hand
Unlock the door from the inside
Claim your kingdom, your crown
Tell us your story of old
Live your story of new

I run away for the last time. I'm a sophomore. It's a Friday afternoon. I have a big project due, Monday. One that I can't finish before class. It has to be done at home. I work in the kitchen. He has an outburst and tears my papers. I'm speechless. Then he hurls something dry at me, crackers, something with a

lot of crumbs. He makes me clean it up. I stomp over toward him to get the broom and start banging the floor with the brush while he is standing there. I'm pissed. I yell for him to clean it up. Throw the broom at him. Mom comes out of the room to ask what's happening. I run past her. Into their room. I sweep off all the things on her vanity with my arms. Her jewelry boxes, trinkets, bottles of perfume fall to the floor. Mom yells at me to stop. I head to the bathroom to start throwing things out of the medicine cabinet. She grabs me. Stop. We wrestle. End up on the floor. I pin her on the ground and tell her that I hate this life and she's not a mom. I tell her I'm Junior's mom. She slaps me in the face. She pins me. He is there watching and smiling. He calmly says, Babe, please. I yell at her to get off me. I head straight to the door, put on my slippers, she follows me to the road and chases me mid-way to the end of our street. She calls out to me, BRANDY. BRANDY. BRANDY. I don't stop. I don't turn back.

I'm older and smarter now. Professional runner. I've got friends with cars. First, my friend's house down the street. She knows the drill. But this time I won't stay long. I call Mary, she picks me up. We go to another friend's house. We tell no parents. We play hot-potato house over the weekend. I keep moving. We party. We get high. I stay high. They get mushy drunk, I forget the world. They give me clothes to wear. Feed me. Worry.

My whirlwind weekend comes to an end when my dad shows up at another friend's house while we are outside smoking cigarettes, skipping school. I'm shocked and relieved. I had imagined this day for years. "Your mom called

me," he said when I asked how he found me. "But, she doesn't know where I am." I said. He explained how he used the information from our last phone call to start his investigation. I'm impressed. He tells me we have to leave now.

"Where?" I ask.

"Home."

"What? NO!"

"Home in Honolulu."

My friend waves.

I'm free.

I am grateful for the women who unwittingly served as mothers in my life over the years. Moms I attempt to emulate when I became a mother. Friends' moms; Grandma; my mother-in-law; Mama Dee--my husband's ex-co-worker who accepted us as her own after my mother-in-law passed months after our wedding. Mama Dee showers us with attention, presents, and cards at every birthday, anniversary, and holiday. She comforted me in the hospital during the birth of my children. Yet I have and continue to keep her at arm's length. Somehow, I feel guilty, ashamed, undeserving. Her outpouring of love amplifies my pain. I don't know how to have a mother like her.

I text my son, now a college sophomore in Hilo, to cross-reference my memory: Hey, super random...do you remember the last time you saw my mom? (I wonder if I should write "grandma." I wonder if I should ask if it causes him any

discomfort that I'm asking.) And do you remember how many times you've seen her in your life?

He texts back: Last time I saw her? Maybe when I was 6-8? No clue kinda...and maybe a couple times I've only remember seeing her

Me: Yeah, I was thinking that age too. Thanks. Writing sad things.

Him: Stay strong. Emoji with teary eyes.

Me: Heart emoji.

We arrive at the beach. We unload towels and coolers, remember the sunscreen. We remark at our luck for the perfect conditions and find a spot on the grass in the shade of the massive banyan tree. We laugh and take selfies. We take group pictures. We complain about the flies and stand in line at the ice cream truck for sundaes and fudgesicles. We pretend this is a typical family weekend. We conceal the fact that we have not been altogether like this for years.

"Oh God. Look, I'm turning into mom," my sister says, elbowing me gently. The four of us women sit close in a staggered row facing the shore. Lynn signs her words again for Junior's deaf girlfriend, then reaches into her bag and pulls out a lacey paper accordion fan. She puts on her sunglasses and dramatizes our mother's movements. Mom lets out a low, "ooh yeah" in approval, fanning her face. Together with their large-brimmed straw hats, dark shades, black beach

attire, they arch their backs and flair their fans just above their noses. Prepared for pictures they pose and mirror each other as I click away.

"One last one," I say and fake press the shutter button while I record a thirty-second clip of puckering lips and adjusting motions. "It's a video," I admit as the two of them release back into their slouches. We laugh as if we are a family of laughers. Our laughs mask the reality of grandchildren taller than their four-foot-ten grandmother who are getting to know her for the first time. In the middle of our masquerade, I pick up the echoing of the identical sound patterns of mine and my mother's rhythmic laughter.

Mom stands up to invite us all to enter the calm, outstretched bay. Lynn and I shake our heads, no. My brother and his girlfriend are entrenched in a battle of hand gestures. My eight-year-old, the youngest responds--jumping at the chance. "Let's go, Graaaan-maaa!" My older daughter quietly follows to brave the beautiful but biting cold. My younger girl stays to sort through the beach glass and shells Mom brought as a gift from her collection. "Those are real, and old. Your mom and aunty probably found a lot of those when they were little," she tells her. I don't want any of her gorgeous keepsakes.

I feel a hyper awareness of holding myself to the moment. I concentrate on my breathing -- the way the salty air smells familiar. I catch myself from diving deeper into memory. *He is gone.* I focus on enjoying this moment for what it is—a family day at the beach. My resolve for clarity wanes and I grab my camera to preserve the scene. I zoom-in on my son's beaming smile as he is pulled along

on an inner-tube by his "Graaaan-maaa." A sweet picture. Yet, I cannot shake the sick, panic-filled feeling that she will let go of the float and watch my baby drift out into open sea.

I must tell you. Though it may hurt me. It hurts even more to keep it inside.

I write this for you. I write this for me.

It's mid-December, days away from my mother's birthday. I decide to write to her. I want to write a book and pour out my heart. Instead it's a few sentences in a little card. I send her wishes. Wishes that life would have been different. Wishes to have her in my life, my children's lives. Wishes for a Happy Birthday. I tell her I forgive her. She sends me a photo Christmas card.

In the summer, I visit my dad in Hilo. I call my mother. That's when we make plans to go to the beach. After the beach, she invites us to her house. It's a different house from my childhood. She's moving again and wants to give my sister and me some things.

There are boxes scattered around the house. I've only been there once before. Most of her little trinkets, figurines, and picture frames are gone from the shelves, except for her picture from her senior year of high school. I admire how pretty she was. She tells us she's not sure when she'll be moving since she must wait to sell the house. But, she's ready to join Junior and his girlfriend on the mainland. My kids settle into the living room and she puts on the TV.

She brings out a box. It is half-filled with a couple of yearbooks, pictures, and some newspaper clippings. "This is for you guys," she says and goes to the kitchen to prepare a snack for my kids. Lynn and I rummage through the box. The yearbooks are our brother's from elementary. We flip through the pages and see that he has drawn black X's over Lynn's smiling face. We comment about how mean both my brother and I were to her. I find my baby book. I had assumed she burned it. Most of the pages are blank. The first page is written in felt pens with my mother's decorative handwriting. There are traces of pencil marks under the colorful words. I laughed at three-and-a-half months. I slept through my first shot at one-week-old. I weighed six pounds, twelve ounces at 10 days. The entries stop at 4 months. There are a few pictures and my birth announcement from the hospital crib. I'm glad to have it.

I'm the only one with a baby book. There is a composition book in the box. It's Lynn's. "I made my own scrapbook," she says. She doesn't quite remember making it and remarks about the sad state of a little girl preserving her own memories. I try to offer some comfort by sharing that my first born is the only one with a baby book. It's a thing. Moms get busy. She looks at me. I look away. *I know, not the same.*

She whispers to me, "She's getting rid of our stuff."

"What? No, she just wants us to have it."

"Do you think she has things of ours that she's keeping? Think about it. This is it. This is all that's left."

I don't want to believe it.

"Believe me," she says.

I do. Yet, I try to brush it off. She's got to have some things I reason, more for my sake than Lynn's.

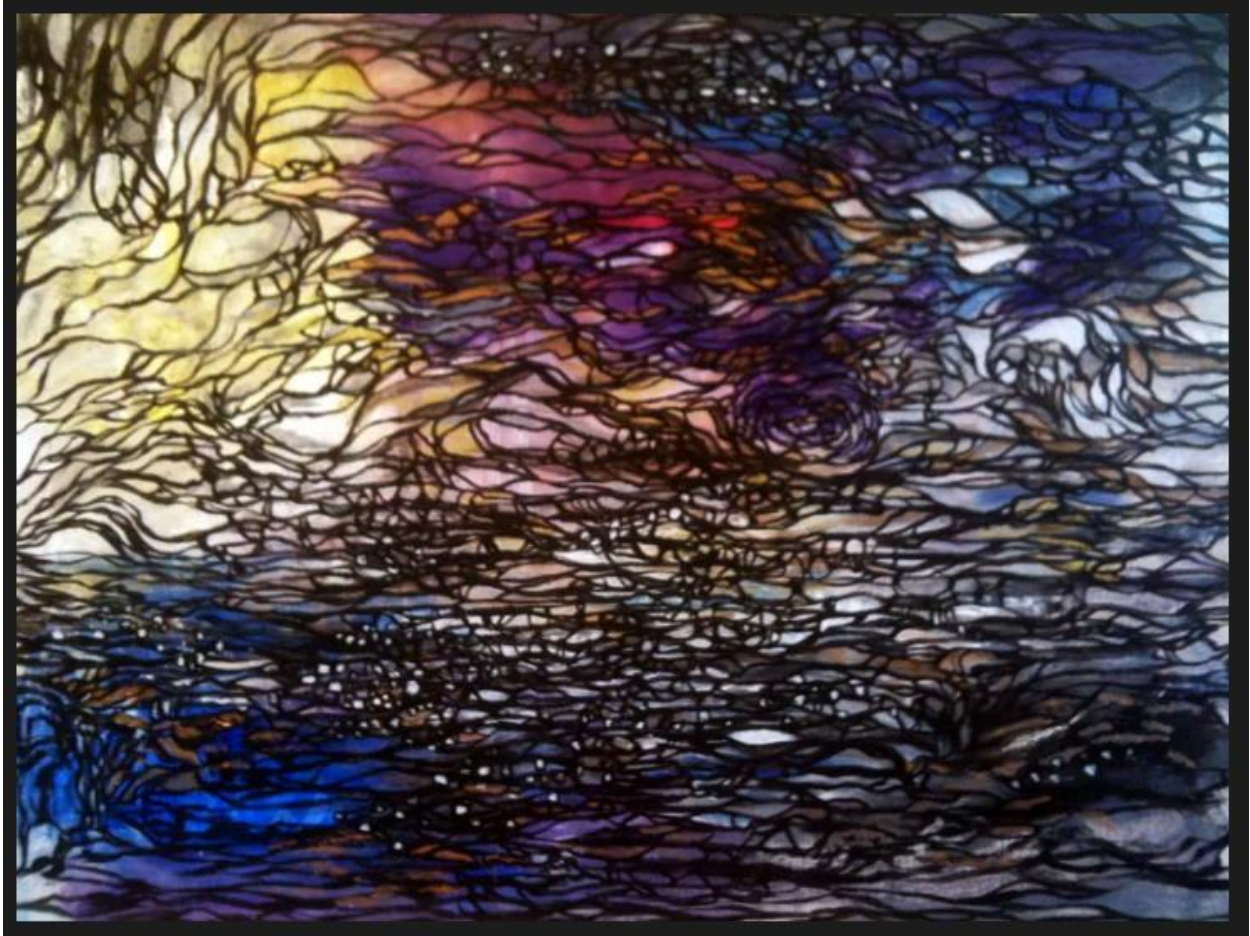
Our mother brings out some old photo albums. "Take what you want," she tells us. We take all the ones of us. I hesitate to take one that my step-father is in with me. His back is turned and I decide to keep it.

It is her birthday the following year. I text her, Happy Birthday. She texts back a picture of her in a big, warm coat with Junior. I ask where she moved. No reply.

It is the New Year. I text her. She texts back the next day.

It is Mother's Day. I text her. She texts me an image of flowers and sends her "love and hugs."

It is my birthday. She texts me, "Hi, honey," with pink and orange tulips. I thank her and tell her I have a cold but otherwise am having a nice day. She tells me that I'm young and strong and to take care.



Oil and Acrylic Painting by: Trissy Lynn

I didn't get to say goodbye. One way ticket to the city. Far across the water. An ocean of tears. No luggage, no money. But still I see you.

I couldn't find you at graduation. Feigned smiles for the pictures. Under the load of flowers. A weight heavier on my heart. No cards, no wishes. But still I feel you.

I walked down the aisle without you. Surrounded by love's warm embrace. True love's kiss. A promise divine. No affirmation, no advice. But still I want you.

Welcomed babies beyond your reach. Sleepless days and nights. Sweet giggles and scary cries. A life overflowing. No comfort, no relief. But still I need you.

I grew up in your absence. Decades of moments. In laughter and in mourning. A soul missing you. No beginning, no ending. Still, I love you.

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